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1992

### Interview with Mary Brown

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Mary Brown

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#### Recommended Citation

Douglass, Kenneth M. and Brown, Mary, "Interview with Mary Brown" (1992). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 136.  
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/136>

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## CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH MARY BROWN

On Friday, June 26, 1992, Mary Brown was interviewed in her home concerning her career as a teacher and specifically the years she taught in one-room schools. The interview took place in the dining room of Mrs. Brown's home in Osborne, Kansas.

Mary was born on a farm north of Portis, Kansas, the oldest of four children. Her two brothers and one sister were her main playmates as she was growing up, but occasionally her cousins would come for week-end visits. Her grandparents lived across the road which added to the strong family support Mary enjoyed. Mary's father was a farmer, and her mother had been a teacher before she was married. Mary's mother had received a two-year degree before becoming a teacher, and both of her parents' interest in education and learning helped shape Mary's life.

Mary attended grade school in Portis, Kansas, where classes were small, and she received a great deal of individual attention. After the beginning of World War II, her family moved to Portland, Oregon, where her father worked as a molder for the military. While in Portland, Mary attended a large high school. The large enrollment and collegiate curriculum of the school made learning very difficult for Mary.

She was quite happy to return to the farm that summer with her family to help with harvest. It was during this time, however, that her father suffered a disabling injury, and Mary and one brother moved to Missouri to live with an uncle. In Missouri the school was much smaller than the one in Portland, and Mary enjoyed school more.

Her uncle owned a soda shop, and Mary spent some of her spare time as a waitress there. The next year, Mary returned to Portis. Her father thought that the farm was the best place for his family, and Mary said, "I'm sure it was the best place for us." Being the oldest child, she felt a great deal of responsibility for the farm and her brothers. It was here that she learned to become a very responsible person. The responsibility she gained from those experiences contributed to her success as a teacher.

Mary finished high school in Portis. After graduation Mary had some trouble deciding what she wanted to do. Her parents' emphasis on education and her experience as a waitress kept her from being satisfied with a mediocre job. She wanted to do something exciting. The idea of being a pilot or a doctor appealed to her, but her financial resources were quite limited. She decided of all her options, teaching was the most promising. Following high school graduation, she attended Kansas Wesleyan University during the summer to prepare to teach. Mary took three courses. One was a reading course, one was public school teaching, and the other was Miss Kettle's handwriting class. There wasn't much of a selection of classes; she was just told what to take.

Mrs. Brown taught in three different schools in the next three years. Her first school was a one-room school just ten miles from her home. In that school she taught six students in grades one through eight. The next year she taught first and second grade in Portis. The year after that she taught in a one-room school north of Lucas. In that school she taught one first grader, five fifth graders, one seventh grader, and an eighth grader.

Mary's first year of teaching was in a one-room school near her home where she taught children who were her neighbors. She drove her parents' Model A car to school, and most of her students walked. The building was the typical one-room schoolhouse with a separate area for the water bucket and the children's lunches, and two privies behind the school. Since there was no well or cistern at the school, Mary had to carry the water for herself and the students. The building was heated by a stove that burned wood or coal. Mary found that starting the fire in the stove was one of her more difficult "teaching" tasks.

After the students complained that they were cold at school, an older neighbor boy came to start the fire for her. Mrs. Brown related that at one time she ran out of fuel for the stove. When she contacted one of the three school board members about the problem, he told her that he was not the one responsible for furnishing fuel, and if she ran out of it, she should dismiss school. The students didn't want her to do that, so she allowed them to go down to the creek to gather wood during recesses and the noon hours.

The district provided Mary with a desk for herself and one for each of the students. The students bought their own books and provided their own materials, including their own drinking cups. Any other teaching supplies Mary needed she had to buy herself. She was able to make copies of work sheets on a copier that used ink and a gummy material that her mother had. The only reference books to which she had access were outdated ones of her parents. She could go to the county superintendent to obtain some of the extra books she needed.

The curriculum Mrs. Brown taught was set by the state and included a course on agriculture for eighth graders. Her teaching materials consisted basically of the textbooks mandated by the state, and she taught everything that was in the book. Her teaching methods consisted of giving the students their assignments and of having the students work through them at their own pace. Mary would help them when they had trouble with an assignment by going around the room and sitting with the children at their desks. This gave the children a great deal of individualized attention. The lessons also included oral reading and group discussions.

Mary said that she learned more in her first year than she ever did in a year of college. She remembered her eighth-grade student from that year who had a great deal of trouble with his school work. Mary said that by reading through the eighth-grade lessons and helping that young man learn the material, she learned quite a bit as well.

Mrs. Brown found parts of her job difficult. Even worse than getting the fire started in the stove was filling out all of the reports required by the county superintendent. She found help for this task as well. In fact, Mary said she doubts she'd ever have been able to figure them out if her mother had not helped her. Another problem Mary had was with eighth-grade math. Sometimes her answer would not agree with the one in the answer book. Again, Mary would look for the resources she needed. For this problem she sought help from her mother and father, as well as the eighth-grade math teacher in Portis. Mary remembered having trouble figuring out the

answer to a particular math problem, and none of her sources could help her. She puzzled over the problem all night and finally discovered the answer as she was pumping water for school the next morning.

Mrs. Brown's experiences in the one-room school north of Lucas were very similar to those she had in the Portis area. There was the same eight-month school term that started after Labor Day and was finished near the end of April. There weren't many holidays, but they did get a two-week vacation for Christmas. In both schools the parents showed their support by attending the student programs; however, the parents and the school board members seemed more trusting of her, and Mary felt that she had a large amount of freedom to teach.

Mary didn't have much supervision while she was teaching. The county superintendent never came to visit or observe. Mary's evaluation seemed to be based on her attendance at various meetings and the performance of her students on the county exams. In fact, Mary's students wanted Mary to help them on their exams as the previous teacher had done. Since Mary refused to do so, her evaluation wasn't as good as her predecessor's had been.

About the only requirement the parents and school board members made of Mary was that she play with the children during breaks. If the students provided the necessary equipment, the play included softball, baseball, and "Annie, Annie Over." When no equipment was available, they played tag, hide-and-seek, and even games in the haystack across the road. During the winter the students enjoyed

sledding and building forts and snowmen. Mary enjoyed that part of her job very much and through that play she built a strong rapport with her students.

One parent took advantage of Mary and would occasionally leave a pre-school child at the school for Mary to baby-sit while the parent took care of personal business. The child ran around the room and was quite distracting to the students, but there wasn't much Mary could do about it.

In both schools the students worked hard and were obedient. Mary never had any kind of a discipline problem in either school. Mrs. Brown felt that the small numbers facilitated her classroom management, but she also commented that the children studied much harder then. They were accustomed to hard work on the farm and were willing to work hard at school. They didn't need to be entertained, but found their schoolwork interesting and rewarding.

Some differences Mary remembered about the Lucas country school were that the Lucas school had a pump for water, and there was always plenty of coal for the stove. In the Lucas country school she had five fifth graders, which was quite unusual since one or two children per grade was more the norm. With this group she used a bench at the front of the room where they worked as a group. She also remembered that the roads were particularly muddy. One night it was so muddy that she could not even walk home but had to spend the night with a neighboring family. Many times her husband had to come across the pastures to drive her home, and once he even drove across a frozen pond.

Mary found her teaching experience in the little town of Portis quite different from her country school experience. Since she was teaching only two grades, first and second, she felt she had much more time to teach. Mary didn't feel nearly so isolated in Portis as she had in the country schools. The other teachers accepted and respected her, even though some of them had been her teachers just a few years before. Mary remembered having students in her classroom that were children of older, more experienced teachers. Those teachers came to her to ask what they could do to help their children improve school work. Mary felt that these teachers knew more about teaching than she did, and she should be asking them what to do. Their confidence in her, however, really helped to build her self-esteem.

In another instance, a parent was telling Mary exactly how Mary should be teaching. The parent's sister was a teacher, so the parent considered herself to be an expert. When Mary confided the incident to an older colleague, the colleague told Mary not to worry about it because that parent tried to tell all the teachers how to teach. Mary was told to continue as she was because she was doing a fine job. This kind of support from the other teachers was a big help to Mary.

In spite of the positive differences in the town school, Mary felt more pressure from the community. She was told that she should attend church and join community organizations if she were to be accepted in Portis. Mary felt that there was a greater level of



expectations from the parents concerning her teaching and the performance of her students than she had felt in the country schools.

Looking back, Mary wondered how much good she did during those first years of teaching. She could see the improvement of the eighth grader with whom she spent so much time, but how much she helped some of the other students was harder to see. There was a seventh grader that worked independently. This student became a college professor, so Mary felt she had a part in helping to prepare him adequately for his lifework. When Mary thought about the first grader she had in her first school, she wondered how the child ever learned to read. Mary had no training in phonics and had only one textbook for the child to read. In those days there was a great deal of memorization, and the grade level requirements weren't as high as those at the present time. Mary wondered how she survived those years and how the students were able to learn. As Mary looked back, she concluded that her survival came partly from her mother's help and example and partly from her own natural teaching ability. She felt she was born to teach.

Mary has seen many changes through the years. One of the greatest changes is the amount of schoolwork that is expected of children. When she first began, first graders had to be able to count to ten. Mary taught them to do some simple addition and subtraction, but that was not required by the state. Not only has math become more difficult, but the reading vocabulary and phonics skills have become more difficult as well. Mary estimated that first graders last year were doing the work of the third or fourth graders

she taught in the country schools. Another change Mary has seen is the advent of technology in the classroom. Video tapes have made learning so much more interesting and exciting. Computers have provided an amazing new avenue of instruction. Mary also noted the number of books and materials she has used in the past several years is so much greater than she had available in the country schools.

Mary has also noticed a vast difference in her students. Students in recent times seem to need to be entertained. They are so accustomed to television that it has been difficult to keep their interest with other forms of instruction. Mary noted that few children have had to take much responsibility for doing their work or seem to care about doing it well. The changed attitudes of the students have made teaching more difficult.

Although there have been many changes in education since Mary began teaching in the one-room school, she has seen some areas where changes are still needed. One of the areas that Mary has seen a need for change is the amount of work students are expected to do. She has felt that there has been too much academic pressure placed on children, particularly at the lower elementary levels. She believed that children need a chance to be children. Mary stated that too many academic expectations prevent this. Mary did not believe that children should have no expectations placed upon them; however, she believed that children need a greater feeling of responsibility. She believed that children needed to be taught to take pride in their work and to try hard to do well.

Another area that Mary saw that needed changing was teacher empowerment. She felt that parents, administrators, and school board members needed to trust the teacher expertise and trust them more in making decisions about assignments and curriculum development. Mary also said that it would help if teachers received more positive feedback from those who are satisfied with what the teachers are doing. Teachers receive frequent feedback from those who are dissatisfied, but don't get much feedback from those who are satisfied.

When asked what advice she would give to prospective teachers, Mary said, "Make sure you love kids; you have to love kids." She also recommended that the prospective teacher be diplomatic. Parents can be important allies if approached diplomatically. Mary thought that it was important for prospective teachers to spend a substantial amount of time managing children in a variety of situations to determine if they really want to be teachers. Mary thought that colleges have done a better job at exposing young teachers to children during the freshman and sophomore years than the colleges did in the past. Mary recommended that the prospective teachers should take classes that will prepare them to work more effectively in the classroom. She also felt that they should be made aware that teaching is hard work and should not be chosen as an occupation because it is an easy job with summers free. She also said that the prospective teacher should realize that the salary is much lower than other professions requiring the same amount of preparation.

Mary said that to be a good teacher one must be willing to work hard, be a positive role model for the children, and be excited about teaching. She felt that it is important for the prospective teacher to realize that shaping young lives is the most important job there is since those young lives will be our next generation. Above all, the prospective teacher must really love children because "children need to know you care."

When asked what advice she would give to prospective administrators, she stated that there must be a mutual trust between the teacher and the administrator. They must trust each other to do his/her best. She mentioned that the principal she worked with in Ness City was her ideal of what a principal should be. She related an instance when she came into the office one morning before school. The principal required them to sign-in each morning in his office. As she signed in she let out a big sigh. The principal said, "It isn't that bad is it?" Mary then confided in him a problem she had at home. Mary said that it really helped to know that he cared and that he would keep her confidence and not judge her for the problem she confided. As she left the office, she felt relieved. It was as if she had given the problem to him, and then it was gone. Mary felt that support was very important for a principal to give. A principal can protect the teachers and stand between them and their critics. If that protection is there, the teachers have a greater freedom to teach. Again, Mary emphasized a need for mutual trust between the principal and the teacher.

In regard to the future, Mary was somewhat unsure. She knew that she would return to her classroom in Downs in the fall, but didn't know how long she would continue teaching. Mary commented that teaching has become harder. It seemed to her that there was less time to do the added tasks that were expected of her. She also mentioned the apathetic attitude of students and lack of positive support from parents as things that have made teaching harder. While teaching has become more difficult, Mary couldn't imagine herself not teaching. Mary just didn't know if she would be able to survive without kids.

She related an incident she had while in California at a McDonalds. While she and her friends were there, a busload of children entered the restaurant. As Mary and her friends were leaving, one of them commented on "all those kids swarming all over the place." Mary replied, "Oh, I loved it; I just got up and got in the middle of them and it felt so heavenly."

There were many activities Mary would like to get done. She would like to be able to go through her teaching files and get them organized. She would like to write her family history for her grandchildren so they will be able to appreciate their heritage. If she no longer taught, she would like to give her house a real thorough cleaning. Most of all, she and her husband would like to travel. She would particularly like to travel in the fall, something she has been unable to do since she began teaching. She related that she would really enjoy taking a train ride across Canada when the

leaves have changed color. She thought that would be a wonderful trip. As far as hobbies were concerned, Mary said that teaching has been her hobby. She has spent so many hours grading papers that she decided that she would need to have papers to grade in the nursing home or she wouldn't know what to do with herself.

It is interesting that Mary chose to teach with the idea that it would not be exciting or interesting. After gaining some maturity and some experience, teaching has become a ministry for her. What began as a job of almost last choice has become a way of life for her. A way of life that will be very difficult for her to end.